

# 50th year

## Disney first celebrates a big birthday

ONCE upon a time, 50 years ago to be exact, there was a struggling young man with an impossible dream.

The young man, who was in love with storytelling and fantasy, wanted to make a full-length film using animation and everyone said it could never work. Audiences would watch cartoons like *Steamboat Willie*, but a whole movie? No way.

Walt Disney refused to listen and for three years he worked on his dream, the Grimms' fairy tale *Snow White*, brought to life by artists and the miracle of animation.

Then in 1937, at a cost of \$1.5 million, *Snow White* was completed and it instantly became a hit.

*Snow White*, with its soundtrack of famous songs, such as *One Day My Prince Will Come* and *Whistle While You Work*, has enchanted audiences through four generations and this year the Disney Studios in Burbank, Los Angeles, are celebrating *Snow White*'s 50th birthday with the razzamatazz you'd expect from the company that opened a fun park called the Magic Kingdom and created America's heroes like Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck and Goofy.

But the celebrations that got under way this month in Hollywood at Disney are more than just a big birthday party for *Snow White*.

The Disney Company had fallen on hard times after its founder, Walt Disney, died and throughout the mid 60s and 70s no longer seemed to have its founder's sure touch when it came to films and even to fun parks.

The Magic Kingdom watched visitors to the park fall off in the late 70s and early 80s as modern kids stared blankly at Toad of Toad Hall rides and Alice in Wonderland's teacups. They wanted to know where R2D2, Darth Vader, and Indiana Jones — their new heroes — were. Over at Burbank there were problems with Disney's films which were no longer leading the way in family entertainment and were frequently, like *Tron*, \$20 million box-office flops.

Donald Duck turned 50 in 1984 and there were Disney parties and galas, but for Disney itself there was little reason to celebrate. Walt Disney Productions had fallen to the studio of last resort for movie-makers, a dream factory running on empty

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that churned out annual re-issues of classic animated films.

In 1984 and 1985 the tide still had not turned. The \$25 million animated *Black Cauldron* lost big money. So too did the much-touted \$25 million *Return To Oz*, not to mention *The Black Hole* and other attempts by Disney to return to the golden years.

But those films were the last of the old, stodgy, nervous Disney regime and even as the movies flopped at the box office, by early 1985 there were signs that there were changes at Disney and things were about to turn around.

The reason was the hiring of whiz-kid Michael Eisner.

Aggressively, Eisner got Disney back on track.

### Whizz-kid gets studio out of hole

First up were movies, movies that would work. Instead of spending huge money, Eisner's idea was the old 1930s studio system — get the best of the young directors, writers, and actors, sign them up to deals and make films not of \$25 million but of a more realistic \$12 million so that if the film takes off it is in profit quickly and if it flops little is lost.

Eisner signed up people like Shelley Long, of *Cheers* and Bette Midler, the Divine Miss M, whose movie careers had slumped. He grabbed Danny DeVito, *Beverly Hills Cop* star Judge Reinhold, Richard Dreyfuss, Nick Nolte, and a series of actors who were known but not in the \$1 million-a-movie league and who were all keen to work and try the Disney experiment. It was the same with writers. Eisner took a chance on many young unknowns.

The first film off the new Disney ranks was *Down and Out in Beverly Hills*, with Dreyfuss, Midler, Nolte and a dog named Mike. The movie was a smash and after two



*Snow White* was Disney's first full-length feature film and made a fortune.

weekends of release was in the black and making money for the ailing Disney giant. Then came *Ruthless People*. Even better. Even bigger. Now there's *Outrageous Fortune* with Shelley Long and Bette Midler which, with its rollicking, ribald script by unknown 32-year-old Leslie Dixon, has had rave reviews.

In addition, Disney has revived its hold on the television market and not only with its Disney cable station in the US. Disney has its hand firmly back on network television after its famous *The World of Disney* series wound down and flopped because of old age.

And out at Disney's Magic Kingdom, the new generation of kids reared on *Star Wars*, Indiana Jones, and television are arriving in droves to see Disneyland's new attractions.



*Snow White* and her seven dwarfs became household favorites after the Disney feature film.

## Animated film dream came true for Walt